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ABSTRACT

Approaches that were used to teach English to fifth grade children of Mexican-American migrant farm laborers are described. The students were categorized as limited in English language proficiency. The children's academic self-concept was so low that they perceived learning as involving impossible tasks, and they believed that they were the source of their own problems. One cause for their failure was that they had little opportunity to read and write. The curriculum was adapted to the students. Instead of the oral reading period, the teachers read stories to the students. Class time was also set aside for journal writing, and teachers read and responded in writing to students' work. Educational objectives included: conveying to students that writing and reading could be important in their lives; developing fluency and turning nonwriters and fearful writers into bold writers; and desensitizing students to errors. The journal writing provided a natural language exchange and a sense of audience, and also developed a positive self-image and sense of success for students. This technique also addressed individual needs of students at different proficiency levels. Topics of student writing projects included: love letters to students' mothers or fathers and biographies of others. By the end of the year, the students were reading and writing fluently and purposefully. All curricula areas were covered, and students increased their reading proficiency and written production. Five student writing samples are appended. (SW)

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To Read You Must Write: Children in Language Acquisition

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James Asher (1985) has convincingly demonstrated to us over the years that we can teach, and our students will learn, a second language, if our classroom activities are meaningful, if they touch, in other words, our students' lives and mirror their experiences. Along with activities and procedures that strike students as meaningful, there must always exist an atmosphere, an attitude really, in which students will feel secure. Smith (1981) labels this attitude "sensitivity"; and Asher puts it this way: "If students are presented with no-risk learning experiences, if they feel comfortable and secure, then they can learn" (1985). "Sensitivity" is just what is lacking in many second language classrooms at the present time, Asher suggests, pointing to the alarming statistic that only four percent of those who enroll in second language courses remain until they are proficient. And the failure rate in learning how to read and write, judging by the calls for

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learning how to read and write, judging by the calls for educational reform, and a "return to the basics", must also be high. But following Asher's and Smith's reasoning the risk of failure may be too high for learning to take place in language classrooms. We need to foster a classroom environment where vocabulary is learned, sentences are understood, grammatical structures are acquired, and, in short, language competence develops.

Our students, fifth graders, with ages ranging from 10 through 16, were second language learners of English; all were dominant in their first language, Spanish. They had been categorized as LEP (limited in English language proficiency). All were, in fact, reading and writing three grades below the norm. Some could not read at all. They lived in a rural area, all sons or daughters of Mexican-American migrant farm laborers, most of whom were themselves illiterate, whose children after five years of instruction had only advanced two years in reading proficiency. The children's academic self-concept was so low that each perceived learning (and school) as an assortment of impossible tasks. Moreover, they had actually come to believe that they were the source of their problems. When we met them at the beginning of the school year, they were failures and were looking forward to the time when they could leave school and follow the path of the migrant farm laborer, like their parents, earning just enough to place them at the subsistence level of income. There was no

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alternative; not one had goals or aspirations beyond a future in the fields.

Their parents were honorable, good people. All worked hard and long in the heat of summer, traveling from one agricultural region to another, planting, cultivating, and harvesting for others. They owned very little, except for cars that were constantly in need of repair and the clothes they took with them. They returned from the fields in August and September, worked in menial jobs during the Fall and Winter, and left again in April and May, before school was out. When they returned, they enrolled their children in school. Just as there exists a cycle of planting, cultivating, growing, and harvesting, there also exists a cycle of school tasks. Yet for most of our children the harvest yielded failure. They had failed to learn to read and write sufficiently well to insure success in higher grades.

Why they had failed to learn to read and write, even after five years of school, is a subject for another paper. Suffice it to point out that the problems faced by these migrant children are endemic: they do not do well in school. However, as we surveyed the curricula of their previous school experiences, one cause for failure became apparent: these children had had little opportunity to read and write. As Krashen (1985) said recently, reading is an activity of increasing returns: the more you read the better you become. Good readers enjoy and read books for pleasure, and seek

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additional opportunities for reading (even "under the covers with a flashlight"). We found that poor readers read less, when they should be reading more; they have fewer opportunities to read. If they are identified as having reading difficulties, if they are "problem" readers (as were our children), they are placed in "remedial classes" and re-taught the "skills" of reading. But as Goodman, Goodman and Flores (1979) point out, to "re-teach" is exactly the wrong approach to follow: "It is simply not possible to treat literacy as an isolated set of skills and expect children to learn. In too many programs for bilingual children, there is too much concern for form without function, too much tradition and too little relevance, too much focus on skill and not enough on comprehension, too much making kids adapt to the curriculum rather than adapting the curriculum to the kids. That is not good for any learners: for bilinguals it can be tragic." Yet it had been that way for our children.

We began the school year in August by giving our children many opportunities, and the time, to read and to write. We read to them stories of their experiences and the experiences of children their age. In short, we began to adapt the curriculum to our children. During those first few weeks of school , contrary to the "traditional" procedure, we did not have an obligatory oral reading period, with students in groups reading to us. Instead, we read to them. We had a purpose: by reading to them, we were

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increasing their awareness of how stories fit together (story grammars), how prose is organized, especially the narrative structures of many of the stories written for children of their age. In addition, by spending a great deal of time reading to them, we demonstrated that reading, unlike what many of them had assumed, was interesting and stimulating. We gathered together books from the school library, from the public library, from used book shops, from generous friends. Our classroom eventually became filled with books. We encouraged our children to take books home. Each day we would read the first few pages of a couple of stories, stopping at a crucial juncture in each, and then inquire: "Would anyone like to finish this story at home?" We always had more hands than we could accommodate. Our ultimate purpose was to get them "hooked on books" -- and we did.

During these first few weeks we also introduced our students to the journal -- a special kind of journal called the dialogue journal. The DJ is not new -- it has been around a while -- but for us it was the "catalytic convertor", eventually changing our non-writing students into writers. It got our children to write, and simultaneously it got us back into writing. We first asked our students to write three lines about a topic of their choice, about anything, a topic they could and would write about, either from what they had experienced in school, at home, in the fields, or in their day to day activities with

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their families. They provided the context, the focus. We set aside fifteen minutes a day for journal writing. We responded to their writing with at least three lines of our own. We occasionally might write longer responses but never shorter. There were several restrictions: we never edited or corrected mistakes; and we always responded to their focus. More importantly, perhaps, we always attempted to convey our responses in clear, understandable language. In effect, we provided them with "comprehensible input", input that they could extract meaning and structure from (Krashen and Terrell 1983).

While we gave time in class for writing in the journals, we took the journals home with us and wrote our responses. Early in the school year most students wrote only three lines -- the absolute requirement. It took us approximately one-half hour to respond to the set of short entries. Later, as their fluency increased, as their entries became longer, it took us about two hours to respond. The marvelous strength of the DJ is that fluency increases with time; and, significantly, as our students wrote, they became better writers: they increased the length of their entries while at the same time their spelling and punctuation improved, legibility improved, organization improved and their papers began to look better.

The DJ was a powerful instrument in our teaching strategy. Why did the DJ work? First, let us look at our goals:

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1. We wanted to convey to our students that writing (and reading) can be important in their own lives. We read to them, to ourselves, and we wrote; and our students saw us participating in and enjoying these two activities;

2. We wanted to develop fluency, to turn non-writers, fearful writers into writers, bold writers. And one way we could do this was to give them time to write in class;

3. We wanted to desensitize them to errors, to show them that errors were an integral part of the process of learning how. All of our children did not participate with enthusiasm initially -- certainly a reflection of their past failures. For instance, Larry who tested at the first grade level in August, turned in a blank piece of paper, on which we wrote: "How can we answer you if you don't write to us?" Larry wrote a few disjointed words the following day; and we asked him in our reply: "What problems bother you about writing?" He answered: "Well, I can't not spell right that's what's bother me about writing" [all entries are unedited]. Larry, as the year progressed, became one of our better writers and readers, an eager participant, not only in his journal writing but also in the other reading and writing tasks that the class participated in.

The above were our immediate goals but we reaped far more than we anticipated. We found that the DJ

1. provided a natural language exchange. Our children's English was still developing, and we provided developed English in our responses. The writing in the journals was

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mainly narrative in style: they told us about going on picnics, helping their families in the fields, taking care of younger brothers and sisters, working on cars, traveling from one region to another, deaths in their families, and other experiences central to their lives. But early on some children began to write expositorily: children would comment, for example, on what they were reading, or what we had read to them. Notice in the following entry that the student begins with a generalization -- "The story I like best" -- followed by details supporting his generalization. And his entry ends with a conclusion (see Figure 1: Appendix);

2. provided a sense of audience. Our children wrote to an audience who read their entries and responded. They were eager the next day to read our replies;

3. developed a positive self-image as we addressed but did not criticize their interests. The DJ improved our relationships with our children and theirs with us. The DJ consisted of a private conversation between us and our children. We learned from each other;

4. developed a sense of success, a "can-do" attitude: they found that they could write understandable and interesting messages, to someone who appreciated their efforts; and the DJ

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5. addressed individual needs: each student was at a different level of development and proficiency. We addressed those levels in our responses by providing information that was understandable ("comprehensible input") and

6. provided a reading lesson each day. The children had to read what we had written in order to respond or to comment.

Some may worry about the errors that occur in journals, just as Larry was worried about his spelling. Errors do occur in spelling, punctuation, and in sentence structure in the journals. We found that the journal entries improved as the students became more fluent and competent in English and more aware of standard editorial functions. While most of the errors that occurred in their entries eventually took care of themselves; others did not and were a cause for concern to our students as they were still sensitive to spelling, punctuation, and structure - the forms of language. What did we do?:

1. we modeled in our responses to the children correct spelling, correct punctuation, and correct sentence structures. "Modr sikle" was spelled correctly in our response, and the child spelled it correctly in a later entry;

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2. some students asked us to correct spelling (Larry's anxieties were shared by others). We were reluctant to turn journal writing into "form" lessons as we were interested in meaning. We did ask them to underline words that they were unsure of and we would use those words, correctly spelled, in our reply;

3. later, we also began to underline in our replies words that they had misspelled. By following this practice, anxieities over spelling seem to lessen; the children became increasingly sensitive to additional editorial considerations as they increased in writing proficiency.

Reading, by children and to children, continued to take up a large part of the school day. We next began to look at the content or academic areas (social studies, science, and mathematics) for sources of writing ideas. Our children would be required in the future, as in the past, to write "academic", expository essays. We began to write drafts of academic papers, which entailed no monumental or dramatic shift of our attention but a shift that dovetailed nicely with the classroom reading and writing activities that we had already introduced and were constantly going on. The final drafts were laminated and published as books. At the end of the school year the class had published twenty one books, beginning with narratives and gradually introducing the content areas. We are unable to give examples from each of the twenty-one books; we will share with you, as we

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continue, an early essay, a mid-year essay, and finally an essay that was written for the "farewell" volume.

For each book, we would first discuss themes (topics were suggested by students); and once a topic was selected - "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Aliens but were Afraid to Ask" - we would then discuss what kinds of information would go into the essays. We all then prepared a first draft, read it to our group (approximately six students were in a group, each responsible for reading his/her essay and suggesting revisions for the others), respond to questions from the group concerning clarity ("What do you mean when you say . . ."), cohesion ("I don't know how the aliens got to Earth"). We incorporated those suggestions into a second draft, read it to our group again. Questions could still be asked, impressions shared, upon the reading of the second draft. We then prepared a third draft. The third draft was ready for editing. We had an editing team to help us all to spell correctly, to punctuate appropriately, and to format our papers. There was one editing team per volume; the editing team had additional responsibilities: organizing the volume, providing a cover, a table of contents, a dedication and title page, and providing a bibliography if one was needed.

One of our first volumes consisted of love letters to our mothers or fathers. We suggested if they did not know a word -- it was early in the year -- they could draw it (a rebus). Some of the rebuses are transparent, while others

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are obscure and require the full context of the letter in which they appear in order to be understood.

For many of our children the "love letter" assignment was the first writing assignment that they had completed -- successfully. By observing our students as they wrote and revised, we knew that they were enjoying writing, while at the same time they knew writing was also an intellectual activity. They published their letters in a volume they entitled "Love Letters" (see Figure 2: Appendix).

These love letters provided us with impetus for more extended writing. In mid year we published our first science report, "Small Wonders and Magic Machines." What was interesting to us was the evolving development of our children's writing skills and language. We noticed the changes in our second science volume, "Mother Nature's Tiny Wonders", published in May, just before our children left for the fields. Their language is clearer in May, spelling has improved (even "scissors" is spelled correctly), and the format is clearer and neater (see Figure 3: Appendix).

One of our final efforts was on biography. We read biographies of others. We discussed the kinds of information biographers included. Then we started on our own and included our own autobiographies in a volume that we called "Autobiographies of Not Yet Famous People." Patricia's autobiography is illustrative of that effort. Certain miscues remain;, however. She still does not have

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the "there/their" distinction. The influence of Spanish syntax prevails in certain constructions: "I have 12 years" (see Figure 4: Appendix).

Even though her paper, and the papers of the other children, still contains miscues, we can notice remarkable improvement from their efforts in August and September, when our children walked into our classroom reading below grade level or not reading at all. By the end of the year, all of our children were reading and writing freely, fluently, and purposefully -- reading texts that interested them and reading others for information they needed for various reports that they were writing. During the year, we covered all the curriculum: science, math, social studies. Our children had increased their reading proficiency and had increased their written production. Our final text, consisting of a "potpourri" of their best, was their last published book. Some of them revised a previous draft, while others contributed an original. We called it "Odds and Ends", a title that reflects what we had read and written during the year; it was our farewell edit on. On the title page we listed all the texts that we had published that year (see Figure 5: Appendix).

What were the results of our efforts, and what could account for these results? We worked with theories of language acquisition that paved the way for practices. Our children averaged three years growth in reading proficiency as measured by Individual Reading Inventories, one developed

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by the Economy Company , the other by the school district. We did not need to test to see improvement, however. We looked at their efforts in August and then in May and knew that dramatic improvements had taken place.

Our children, in August, were failures; they thought of themselves as failures; and they anticipated failing in our class. From the first we attempted to prove to them that they were not failures, to make them believe that they could and would succeed, that reading was interesting, that they could be trusted in what they selected to read and that writing (providing reading for others) was a powerful intellectual tool that they could master and control. They convinced themselves. Their self-images improved: in the volume on future careers (they called it "Great Expectations"), we learned that they wanted to be doctors, teachers (four in the class), nurses, and other careers that would entail higher education. One girl listed "orange grove grower" as a future possibility. We asked whether she wanted to work in the groves; she replied she wanted to own them.

Along the way from August to May, they also acquired more English language skills. They were second language learners of English. They employed English in our classroom; they spoke Spanish at home and at play. They enjoyed language and the prestige of being "bilingual." Our classroom was where the day's activities could be discussed, opinions sought and shared, journals written, books

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prepared. The atmosphere of our classroom encouraged them to communicate with their classmates, allowing active use of language input (Strong 1983). The language they acquired during the course of the year was meaningful, useful, and relevant to their own lives.

Finally, they demonstrated to themselves, more than to us, that they could perform well, whether doing math, science, or the social studies and language arts. They could handle school subjects. They were, as they left us, confident students, anticipating the beginnings of school in August and looking forward to a successful sixth year.

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APPENDIX: Figures 1 - 5

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Mustard Seed magic.

Figure 1

Do you enjoy the stories in these books or are there other books you enjoy more? You have to read these books because they will help you to be able to read any book you want to later on.

The storie I like in all of the stories of all the one I like was the Mystery of the Moving Snowman if I read all the stories in Mustard Seed magic maybe I can pick a other storie that can be more good then the storie of the Mystery of the moving Snowman. But this Book is the best of all the books I ever read in my hole years. Because I like the storie of the mystery of the moving Snowman because who a boy a ragirl find how the Snowman movid to house and house. How ever knowes th anwer wines a sled. And a boy and a girl saw the snow snowman on there yard. They were working toyether and they win the sled. Thates Why I like that storie and I thing thates the storie I like Best of all the storeies I ever read in all the book I ever read in all my yearos is mustrarnseed magic.

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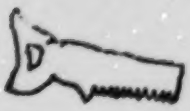
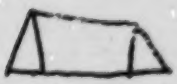
Figure 2

Mom

Yesterday we  the . In the .

With a  and with a and we need the

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To the and we have a good

Time. for do that out side.

I

YOU

MOM

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May 21, 1984 Science Report Apolinar Garcia.

The wasp Head

Figure 3

MATERIALS:

a wasp, glass slides, paper, scissors, projector microscope,

PROCEDURE:

1) Carefully remove the head from the wasp with scissors.
2) Put the head on a glass slide.
3) Put the slide on the projector microscope.
4) Turn on the projector microscope.
5) Focus

RESUITS:

The head of a wasp looks like pac man.

My Big Family
By: Patricia Garza

My Family is a big Family. I have nine brothers and two Sister I live in Pearsall, And in Vacations we go to a big town named Black Rocks. and I was born there in a hospitals and Then my Father got us the passports and then we came here to live. My Mother works in a house with an old woman and my Father work in a house, it is building. And my big brother works building a house, And my other brother works in a house, cutting grass. And my sister goes to school and my brothers Algoras, Francisco, and I, Agustin, and I, we go to school. And we are happy in our home, we are very happy. And Sometimes we go to rivers and to parks and we also go to the parents house and we go to Black Rocks to see our sisters in law and are nieces and nephews and to see my two brothers that are their, with their wifes. And I was born in 1973 of March 28. and all my brothers and my sister were born in Black Rocks, But one of my brothers was born closed to semional. And my family loves to see television. And sometimes we also go to Rivers and to another cities when it is on Vacation. My Mothers name is Juana Garza. We also enjoy churches and sometimes we have a party in the church and we come to a park near by. and we make the party there and we play and have fun. And we also go to other towns and in Black Rocks we sometimes go to circus. I like to eat pizza, Enchiladas, and burritos. Black Rocks is a big town and there

My Big Family Figure 4
By: Patricia Garza

They speak spanish They don't know how to talk in English And some of them are very poor and they just have little houses and there are just like 20 houses that are big. And they just have one school and a big and a pretty church. And there are no parks and they don't have a lot of money and there is a lot of dirt and they also don't have a lot of clothes and shoes. There is a family and they is a girl named Elisa and she have 12 years old and she knows how to talk in English but they are not there they are living in Uvalde. She is my friend.

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Odds and Ends
Mr. Bahruth's 5th Grade Class

Figure 5

Other books in print by the same authors:

Abecedario
Limited Edition
Love Letters
Autumn Leaves
The I Dare You Cookbook of Weird Recipes
Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Aliens...
...but were afraid to ask.
Our Favorites
International Alphabet Soup
Small Wonders and Magic Machines (Science Reports)
Uncle Sam's Biography
Great Expectations
Mother Nature's Tiny Wonders (Science Reports)
The New Improved I Dare You Cookbook of Weird Recipes
Conversation Pieces
The ABC Bestiary
Make-Believe Bestiary
The What Did U Say? Handbook of Idioms
Autobiographies of Not Yet Famous People
Our Outing
Dreamland

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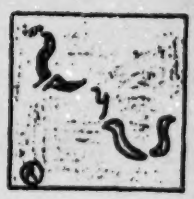

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